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Dusty Christensen, *One of 'baseball's great researchers': Smith professor fields lifetime achievement award*, DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE (Mar. 8, 2018)

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One of 'baseball's great researchers': Smith professor fields lifetime achievement award

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Thursday, March 08, 2018

NORTHAMPTON — Major League Baseball's opening day won't happen until later this month, but the snowy weather hasn't stopped the sport from making the local news.

The Society for American Baseball Research, or SABR, has given longtime Smith College economics professor Andy Zimbalist its Henry Chadwick Award, which is meant to honor "baseball's great researchers."

"It's a lifetime achievement award for doing baseball-related scholarship," said Zimbalist, who was himself avoiding the winter weather in Los Angeles when reached Wednesday afternoon.

The prize is named after the New York Times journalist whose tabulation of statistics like home runs, hits and total bases laid the foundation for statistical metrics like batting averages that are ubiquitous today.

Zimbalist's work has often focused on baseball and the sports business. SABR has described Zimbalist as a "leading voice in the field of sports economics," and he has written more than two dozen books on subjects ranging from former MLB Commissioner Bud Selig to the economics behind massive sporting events like the Olympics and World Cup.

One of Zimbalist's books is "The Sabermetric Revolution: Assessing the Growth of Analytics in Baseball." Sabermetrics, which derives its name from SABR, is the empirical analysis of baseball that can be seen in the countless statistics used to assess player performance.

"Baseball did pioneer in this field," Zimbalist said. "The most important reason is that baseball, if you think about it, is really a sport that depends on individual performance."

Other sports, of course, also rely on a single player's successes or errors, and similar statistical analysis has bled into those sports as well. But in the other major U.S. sports like football and basketball, a individual player's performance is much more influenced by their

teammates' play, Zimbalist said.

"In baseball, the statistics are much more representative of individual effort, and it's much more easy therefore to assess what a player is doing on the field because it doesn't depend as much on everyone else who is on the field with him," Zimbalist said.

The sabermetric approach to baseball was probably most famously dissected in the Michael Lewis book "Moneyball," which was later made into a film starring Brad Pitt and Jonah Hill. The approach does have its detractors, however.

Just one result of the race to collect data and find advantages is the increasing prominence in the game of the "defensive shift," when players in the field move toward where batters statistically tend to hit the ball.

Some say that the rise of the shift has slowed down the game, resulting in fewer runs — and thus less entertainment — for audiences. Current MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred has previously suggested he would be open to banning the shift in an effort to speed up games, which is a priority for a league hoping to gain popularity.

Zimbalist, however, isn't of the opinion that banning the shift would speed things up.

"The moment you start designing things that will produce more runs is the moment you'd have longer games," he said.

One of Zimbalist's suggestions to speed up the game is to increase the size of the strike zone, which he said has shrunk as the years go on. By reversing that trend, he said, batters would be encouraged to swing more often, making their battles against pitchers shorter.

Baseball is far from just an academic passion for Zimbalist. He played the game competitively in middle and high school, and later on Smith's recreational softball team. He has coached his four children's teams in Northampton, and has stayed a committed fan.

"Very often what draws people into a sport is their experience as a child, whether they played that sport or not and whether their household was involved in the sport," he said. The sport was a part of his childhood, and continues to play a role in his life today.

"It's a sport I love to play," he said.

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